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# **Improvisation as a Training Method to Develop Effective Teams in the Workplace with a Focus on Promoting Confidence, Interpersonal Skills and Relationship Building**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for MA in  
Training and Education (QQI)

Centre for Promoting Academic Excellence  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to determine the usefulness of improvisation training (improv) as a training method to develop effective teams in the workplace with a focus on promoting confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. Most adults spend the majority of their working life in the workplace and for most organisations employees are structured in teams across all levels of the organisation. As a result, the effectiveness of the team unit is critical to organisation success.

Improv as an art form has grown in popularity over recent decades as a form of training in the workplace, with participants claiming benefits in areas such as innovation, risk taking, collaboration and team building. As popular as it has grown, research into its effectiveness into the workplace has not grown at the same rate with much research focussed on areas such as innovation. Much of the existing research focuses on one organisation, whereas this study conducts research across a number of different organisations across different industries.

With this research, the researcher is taking an in-depth study on three key soft skill components considered critical for an effective team; confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building, and the impact improv training has on the development of these skills.

The conclusion of the research not only found that improv training has benefit team effectiveness but also that participants considered it to be the most positive team development training or team building undertaken.

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## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

***“Great things in business are never done by one person, they’re done by a team of people.”*** - Steve Jobs, 2003 (as cited in Svyantek, 2017)

### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine the usefulness of improvisation training (improv) as a training method to develop effective teams in the workplace with a focus on promoting confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. This chapter will provide an overview of this topic and the rationale for the research. Improvisation will be referred to as improv throughout this thesis.

### Overview

Teams form the structure behind most organisations in every industry (Troester & Mester, 2007) and effective teamwork is considered essential for any organisation to be successful (Parker, 1990). Research has shown that 85% of an individual’s success is attributable to soft skills and 15% to hard skills such as technical expertise (Robles, 2012). Despite the obvious importance of teamwork, soft skills including teamwork and its components, are considered a weakness in the modern workforce (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010). Research in the U.S.A. in the first decade of this century found that high school graduates were not equipped with the soft skills they need to be successful in college or the workplace (Robles, 2012).

Employees and employers recognise the benefit of team development training with teambuilding training or activities forming the most common approaches (Bender & Septelka, 2002), yet teambuilding training is often shunned and employees often cringe at the prospect of it (Seibold & Kang, 2008).

Improv as a modern form of theatre has its roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the form of Italian improvised theatre *Commedia Dell’arte*, with modern theatres such as *Second City* bringing improv to audiences since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more organisations have embraced improv training as method of training in the workplace (Cole, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2009; Crossan, 1998).



## **Rationale**

There are a number of measures and definitions of effective teams. Effective teams can be defined as a team who meet or exceed productivity goals with the team members being the promoters of the team effectiveness (Chen & Tjosvold, 2014). Effective teams are adaptable, with an ability to anticipate other individual's informational needs due to a mutual understanding of team behaviours and interactions (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Parker (1990) identifies several characteristics of effective teams which includes strong listening skills, working relationships, self-assessment, shared leadership and full participation.

Throughout the literature, there are studies on improv training in the professional and business world, however there are very limited studies on the impact of improv training on teams and the development of skills that contribute to the forming and maintaining effective teams. Much of the literature in the area of improv makes reference to the positive effect on teams, collaboration and other soft skills (Cole, 2016; Rocco & Whalen, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2009). Research by Crossan & Vera (2005) explored the link between improv and innovating performance in teams however the researcher found a gap in the research on improv training and effective teams.

Despite the gaps in the literature, the literature is rich with research on effective teams and the components that contribute to success. The researcher has selected several components of effective teams; confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building, to probe on a deeper level as part of the research. These components were selected as key components of effective teams (Seibold & Kang, 2008) and as commonly cited skills that improv training can improve (E.G. Crossan, 1998; Daly *et al.*, 2009; Cole, 2016). By probing the impact on the components, the study will provide a holistic view to the wider impact on team development and effectiveness.

The majority of the research on improv training in the workplace has been a part of a mix of quantitative and qualitative studies however this empirical study is qualitative to allow for the capture of richer data through semi structured interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). One of the limitations common in other research on improv in organisations is that studies are often

limited to one organisation. However, this study features participants across multiple organisations and industries.

### **Chapters Overview**

In addition to this chapter, this study contains several other chapters as follows:

- Chapter Two reviews the existing literature on the topics of teams, teamwork and improv in the workplace.
- Chapter Three sets out the research themes and justifies the chosen methodology and qualitative approach.
- Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and discusses the results in relation to the existing literature. Some limitations of the research are also discussed.
- Chapter Five brings the study to a conclusion by outlining the results, making recommendations to organisations who seek to develop team and team skills and suggestions for future research.

The bibliography and the appendices are also included.

## **CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In this section, a review of the literature relating to some components of an effective team in the workplace are explored. Parallels on how improv training can have an impact on teams and team development are drawn.

### **Teams in the workplace**

For the vast majority of organisations, employees work within a team environment which fits within the structure of the organisation (Troester & Mester, 2007). A team can be defined as a group of individuals with a variety of skills who are aligned with a specific goal (Drucker, 1974). Within a team, task and goal responsibility is shared amongst the group (Drucker, 1974) and everyone agrees that success can only be achieved by working together (Parker, 1990).

Troester and Mester (2007) propose that all teams are groups, but not all groups are considered to be teams. Strong communication skills are a defining aspect for differentiating between the dynamics of a team and a group (Troester & Mester, 2007). However, Drucker (1974) theorises that “communication is perception” and perception itself is based on experience rather than logic (1974, p395).

To be most effective from a management perspective, the manager or team leader cannot be the dominant voice therefore decisions should be reached through discussion and the team’s agreement (Parker, 1990).

It is recognised that within an organisation both informal and formal teams exist with informal teams operating for recreational purposes but still offering a contribution to the success of the organisation (Troester & Mester, 2007).

Parker (1990) proposes that ineffective teams and effective teams are not opposites. Individual skills are a key attribute for the success of a team or its failure (Prescott *et al.*, 2012).

Drucker (1974) identifies a number of weaknesses in a team which includes, “lack of clarity, communication problems and over concern with its internal relationships” (1974, p.477). In some instances, high skilled employees may not be effective team members with research identifying software developers, who work by themselves delivering quality work as an individual, but lacking the ability to operate efficiently as a team player and see how their team fits in the organisation (Parker, 1990). Team weaknesses can also include perfectionists and employees who refuse to accept democratic decisions made by the team, all of which erode the effectiveness and trust within the team (Parker, 1990).

The literature highlights a lack of interpersonal and soft skills as being a weakness in the modern work force (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010). Mitchell *et al.* (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010) identify some of the key soft skills, with team emerging as the top skill, as follows:

1. Team skills and embracing of teamwork
2. Leadership skills
3. Strong relationships
4. Strong work ethic
5. Effective communication
6. Ability to take the initiative

Employees and graduates who are competent in these skills are shown to have stronger employment prospects (Robles, 2012).

### **Teambuilding and Teamwork**

Teambuilding can be defined as a process designed to improve collaborative performance by tackling and solving problems (Kriek, 2007; Bender & Septelka, 2002). Teambuilding requires individuals to think for themselves and make decisions in order to achieve success (Staggers *et al.*, 2008). Teamwork is a crucial aspect of any organisation (Parker, 1990). High quality teamwork helps create an environment of a positive and productive team experience among employees (Lepine *et al.*, 2008). Teamwork can be defined as two or more individuals working together in a formal capacity for the achievement of a common goal through inter-reliant actions and personal accountability (Riebe *et al.*, 2017). Teamwork manifests after team

building with teambuilding being the productive approach to developing skills necessary for teamwork (Staggers *et al.*, 2008).

The literature identifies interpersonal skills, strong communication and teamwork among the top 10 soft skills that employers identify as being critical in the workplace (Robles, 2012). While this is documented in teamwork research, employees often view teambuilding as something to be shunned and this highlights the perception between what teambuilding is and the teambuilding training delivered (Seibold & Kang, 2008). If teambuilding training is delivered effectively, it can improve relationships in the team and wider organisation (Murphy, 2016).

Seibold and Kang (2008) propose that teams with effective teamwork possess the following ten skills:

1. The capability to impart the team vision
2. Acceptance of their roles and responsibilities
3. Autonomy within their function
4. Set higher expectations of themselves
5. Develop the infrastructure to achieve goals aligned with organisation objectives
6. Self-determination and leadership by the team members, rather than have decisions made by more senior management
7. The empowerment of team members through shared leadership
8. Effective communication among team members
9. Recognition of the contribution of individuals on the team
10. Display respect and trust among the team and peers

Effective teamwork is not only considered an essential method of reduced employee churn (Capps, 2007), it also leads to increased productivity and enhanced success (Troester & Mester, 2007).

Teambuilding can strengthen communication, employee relationships, foster problem solving and improve morale (Bender & Septelka, 2002). The literature shows that teambuilding is often driven by senior management, however a top down approach is ineffective as each employee has an obligation to nurture team building (Wei & Lau, 2012). Research in China has also shown that teamwork needs to be even more effective at senior levels in an organisation than the level required at lower levels, which highlights that strong teamwork is an essential attribute of any organisation (Wei & Lau, 2012).

### **Selection of Team Components**

While there are many components highlight in the literature of an effective team, this research focusses on three components in particular; confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. Based on the review of the existing literature, it was decided by the researcher that these three themes would be selected.

Confidence in both an individual's ability and in the team's ability helps create an environment work effectively with others to overcome challenges and be more innovative (Wong *et al.*, 2009). Studies have also shown that there is link between self-confidence and the impact on both the perception of success and the conditions necessary for success to be achieved and the perception of leadership by peers (Andrews, 1984). Similarly, low self-confidence risks an underestimation of ability (Andrews, 1984). This parallels with Seibold & Kang (2008) identifying both leadership and self-determination by team members as key skills in effective teams and leadership as a key soft skill identified by Mitchell *et al.* (2010).

Interpersonal skills and communication is large topic covered throughout the literature as a crucial component of effective teams (Seibold & Kang, 2008; Parker, 1990).

Finally, relationship building is also covered at great length throughout the literature as a direct contributor to effective teams (Parker, 1990; Wei & Lau, 2012; Riebe *et al.*, 2017). Seibold & Kang (2008) identify relationships indirectly by highlighting the importance of establishing trust, respect and recognition as team components.

## **Improv**

Improv in its modern form found its origins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Italian form of professional theatre, *Commedai dell' arte*, where actors performed without scripts (Vera & Crossan, 2004). The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw improv pioneers such as Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone and Del Close take the lead toward creating the world famous theatre, *Second City* in Chicago (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Improv can be defined as the achieving of goals through creating innovation and being spontaneously adaptive (Cole, 2016). In its theatrical form, improv requires actors to collaborate on stage with the goal of creating spontaneous scenes and shows (Todd, 2012). As there is no script, to ensure the scenes are successful, the actors makes an offer such as an action or dialogue and the other actors in the scene accept this as their reality and build on the premise (Todd, 2012). Grove et al. (2004) extracts from the method acting teachings of Stanislavsky (1863-1938), where improv is a large component and the method trains actors to be fully immersed in their characters and roles. The literature highlights how improv in the workplace provides a fun and playful way to learn and develop in the workplace and in parallel, organisations can benefit from purposeful play and fun through the exploration of creativity and teamwork (Cole, 2016; Rocco & Whalen, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2009).

Improv actors (improvisers) are encouraged to relinquish their anxiety of the unknown and to avoid prejudice from introversion or lack of self-belief as the process of improvising is a combination of discovery and trial and error (Vera & Crossan, 2004). This in turn encourages the repeat behaviour of trying and enjoying the process without concern for achieving an identified outcome (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

## **Improv in the Workplace**

Throughout every day, there are times in both our personal and professional lives that require us to react in the moment and how we react differs depending on the person (Cole, 2016). As some of the basic elements of improv are movements, gestures and speech, Crossan and Vera (2005, p.205) propose “anyone possesses a certain capability to experience and learn from theatre improvisation”. It is also proposed that actors can perform more effectively in a

creative and spontaneous manner through the use of improv rather than using a script (Daly *et al.*, 2009).

In 2002, the Applied Improv Network (AIN) was founded with the objective of fostering applied improv and offering support to members and trainers globally. The AIN's prime belief is that improv can improve the quality of our professional and personal lives. According to their website, there are over 5,000 members around the world as of 2017 (Applied Improvisation Network, 2017).

While successful improv is about supporting your co-performers in scene which establishes trust and respect, this in turn has parallels with successful workplace teams as the sum of the team is more than the sum of the individual team members and in the organisation improv context, what one employee does is determined by what the team is required to do (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

There has been an acknowledgment since the 1900's, that improv can be a strategic competency that fits within the structure of the modern workplace (Vera & Crossan, 2004). The former CEO of Twitter, Dick Costello, is of the belief that improv skills are highly beneficial in organisation (Manjoo, 2015). There has been an increase in the number of organisations utilising improv as a form of training to aid employees be more successful (Yorton, 2003; Gagnon *et al.*, 2012). Large brands such as PepsiCo and Google frequently utilise training in improv (Scinto, 2014). Vera and Crossan (2004) propose that organisations desiring to be more adaptive and innovative should become more like an improv theatre. While research shows that improv is used in organisations, it is seldom utilised when a crisis is encountered (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Improv training is about aiding the journey rather than being the end goal, assisting the development of the skills required in teams or by individuals (Daly *et al.*, 2009). Team building can be used by management as an effective tool to aid team design, ensuring that the team has a rich mix of employees rather than employees that replicate the skills the manager already possesses (Georges, 2000). When improv is used successfully in organisations, employees can take risks that are supported by the colleagues and management, which in



turn compliments the diversity of the team structure (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Even teams that are more diverse in ability with employees offering different skills and experience, can complement their team's abilities more successfully and aid the group achieving its goals if they are working together collectively (Troester & Mester, 2007).

Research by Riveire (2006) acknowledges that a general anxiety about improv exists among participants and that improv trainers should reduce anxiety levels by creating an environment of trust and permitting participants the opportunity to experiment without fear of criticism. Suggestions include referring to exercises as 'games' (Riveire, 2006). Other research acknowledges the sense of nervousness among participants but the need for risk taking to avoid 'playing it safe' by the participants (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2017).

### **Benefits of Improv Training**

Crossan (1998) identifies 6 key themes where improv can be of direct benefit in an organisation:

1. Promoting teamwork
2. Interpreting the environment
3. Strategising
4. Leadership
5. Development of personal skills
6. Assessing company culture

Most improv training experiences take place through workshops with a range of trainers with improv proficiency and where required, a designated expert from the organisation who can determine the objectives of the team or company (Crossan, 1998). The literature suggests that learning can be more meaningful if participants are actively participating in the learning experience and that the improv process can be constructivist in nature (Henriksen & Mishra, 2017).

Occasionally where improv training is being undertaken in an organisation, the words 'improv' and 'improvisation' are limited or substituted to keep the focus for learners on words

such as “responsive” or “creative under pressure” as well as the teamwork dynamic (Crossan & Vera, 2005, p.210).

The literature identifies several studies where improv has been an effective tool in the workplace. One such study was a case study on the impact of improv training in an Irish airline, the metaphor of an improv theatre being similar to the service industry was used (Daly *et al.*, 2009). Other metaphors used in the service industry literature include research observing actors likened to service employees and the task of providing service being that of the performance (Grove *et al.*, 2004). Similar metaphors have been used in the business world, with other research likening an organisation’s customer base to an improv audience and actors to employees (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

In the case study of the Irish airline, training in improv was only provided to employees and new recruits, one workshop provided a template for participants to draw parallels between their industry and the improv theatre (Daly *et al.*, 2009). The workshop contained a mixture of warm-up theatre exercises, improv games and role-plays customised for the industry with no advance notice on what issues would arise (Daly *et al.*, 2009). The results were very positive with the researcher, employees and management commenting that improv training was indeed, “valuable” and “worthwhile” with feedback from direct participants as “very helpful”, “excellent” and “very beneficial” (Daly *et al.*, 2009, p.467).

Misconceptions about improv has been a setback to great utilisation of improv skills in workplace teams, despite the literature drawing clear parallels to its effectiveness (Crossan & Vera, 2005). Improv and the ability think in the moment, can be misunderstood as to mean that improvising results in repeated moments of excellence, which many assume to be a skill one either possesses or doesn’t possess (Crossan & Vera, 2005). In addition, there is a belief that improv will always be successful in resolving issues or produce a positive outcome (Crossan & Vera, 2005). Theories about misconceptions are propagated throughout the literature where improv is often referred to as comedy improv, which suggests that comedy is a necessary outcome of improv (Smith, 2015; Rogers, 2016).

Improv should instead, be interpreted as an approach to improve the quality of actions at any particularly time and that being spontaneous is just one component of improv (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997). It is proposed that, “teamwork is important for organizational improvisation because what one person does is determined by what all others are doing” (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p.743). Some of the research demonstrated the importance of listening and accepting the contributions from others with research participants while not being overly concerned with perceptions as to how other people might react (Shochet *et al.*, 2013).

Prior research suggests that future research on improv training in organisations should sample the dynamics of teamwork and how it relates to the principles of improv (Crossan & Vera, 2005).

Having explored the dynamics of an effective team in the literature, the next section examines three specific components of an effective team and how the literature shows links between improv training and the development of these components in a team.

### **Team Component: Confidence**

In this section, the focus is on the development of confidence in an individual as an effective component of the team. Whitehouse *et al.* (2002) identified that individuals are expected to be able to apply their skills and knowledge with the relevant confidence in their field. Their study assessed confidence on aspects such as the ability to accept responsibility, decision making, aware of limitations in ability, and be adaptable to change (Whitehouse *et al.*, 2002).

Confidence in the workplace is shown to not only have a positive effect on performance, but also confidence in a collective setting (Jong *et al.*, 2006; Gomes & Knowles, 2000). For example, a team can influence employees impetus and direction in their engagements (Jong *et al.*, 2006). The value that an employee puts on his or herself in the workplace and how they view their worth in an organisation can have an impact on their confidence (Payne, 2007) and employees have a strong desire for self-worth within an organisation (Kanouse & Warihay, 1980). Research shows self-confidence can reduce negative attitudes and help focus on the positive outcomes and results (Gomes & Knowles, 2000). It is also worth noting that confident extroverts in the workplace are considered to be comfortable interacting and socialising with

their peers while being relatively unaffected by phobias around being evaluated by others (Baer *et al.*, 2008).

While there are several references in the literature to the positive effects of confidence on performance, the researcher found limited research demonstrating the results. However, a study by (Jong *et al.*, 2006) demonstrated a link between confidence in the team which led to improved team efficacy and improvements to customer perceived service quality in the financial services industry. The result of prior performance on employee confidence and employee attitude had an impact on the customer experience and objectives .(Jong *et al.*, 2006)

Lightle *et al.*, (2017) propose that financial auditors require strong interpersonal and confidence skills to be effective auditors. A failure to have the confidence to speak up and ask questions can risk jeopardise the quality of a financial audit and discourage team members, particularly those lower in the chain of command, from speaking out and highlighting risks (Lightle *et al.*, 2017).

Research by Shochet *et al.*, (2013) conducted research on medical students and found that a customised improv workshops enhanced the students communication skills and confidence with the result of imparting skills for the students to provide essential patient centric care. They also noted that this type of training may have otherwise been difficult for the students to access within their existing training infrastructure (Shochet *et al.*, 2013).

Research shows that peer feedback and support can boost an employee's confidence, particularly within a team setting (Donia *et al.*, 2015). Some of the basic components of improv not only foster confidence but also promote clarity in confidence (Kelly, 2012).

### **Improv and Confidence**

From the theatrical perspective of improv, performers utilise the principle of 'yes and' to accept the ideas from their co-performers and build upon those ideas on stage, creating a culture of actively building on ideas without the fear of judgement from their co-performers (Crossan, 1998). Through the acceptance of ideas presenting in improv, it helps build the

confidence and the participant's confidence with risk taking (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2017). Research highlights improv training increases confidence of participants and also increases confidence when facing unique scenarios in the workplace (Daly *et al.*, 2009; Vera & Crossan, 2004)

Research with sales professionals and students found utilising the 'yes and' concept and the ability to perform analysis on the spot, provided greater opportunity to use adaptive selling as well as persevere while handling the prospect of rejection (Rocco & Whalen, 2014). Due to the unique quality of 'yes and', improv offers a different perspective on teamwork as all ideas are built upon thus removing the risk of rejecting some ideas where there may be a perception that they are not suitable (Crossan, 1997). The inclination with using improv training is that it completely engages the learner and thus they have the opportunity to contribute more (Yorton, 2003). The majority of improv training sessions are conducted in a group setting which results in a higher level of engagement due to the support and contact with others (Yorton, 2003).

Research in a large organisation showed a positive relationship between teamwork quality and stronger innovation, with the research focus being at an individual level rather than the wider team (Crossan & Vera, 2005).

Some research in the service industry shows that where service employees are customer facing, they are required to offer immediate response with haste and confidence to meet their customer's expectations (Daly *et al.*, 2009). This is notable in the modern workplace given the increasing industry and customer demands and the constantly evolving business landscape (Daly *et al.*, 2009). Research by Daly *et al.* (2009) also identifies the need for empathy and responsiveness in most interactions, which requires individual attention and taking an understanding approach. Similarly the literature highlights how high performing executives lead with both confidence and empathy (Adelia Cellini Linecker, 2016). Empathy can be defined as, "the ability to identify with the emotional response of the 'other'" (Katz-Buonincontro, 2011, p.777). This is an advantageous skill given the understanding that there is a link between well-being and positive relationships, while having positive results (Cole, 2016). Research by Hojat *et al.* (2015) recognised a link between empathy and teamwork in

effective patient care in the medical system. However while the research also highlights limited literature in the specific area of empathy and teamwork in patient care (Hojat *et al.*, 2015), there is also very limited literature available on the impact beyond the medical profession.

Other research highlights how the arts have been used by leadership trainers to teach professionals how to improve their interpersonal skills and leadership abilities (Gagnon *et al.*, 2012). Gagnon *et al.* (Gagnon *et al.*, 2012) also highlighted by way of a case study, that by utilising improv training to develop leadership abilities, a combination of empathy with an increased sense of awareness, were key aspects of the learning process. One of benefits of improv is that the quality of the output can be interpreted in different ways; an audience concludes what the quality of the improv performance is, while the performers conclude on the quality of the process undertaken (Crossan, 1998).

In summary, the research links confidence to performance and effectiveness in teams with elements of empathy emerging in the literature.

### **Team Component: Interpersonal Skills**

Parker (1990) proposes that interpersonal skills are crucial within an organisation and part of the important components of an effective team. Research also highlights that there are many communication roles that employees assume, even where there are no responsibilities in communications in an employee's job role (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). It is also highlighted that the link between quality of relationships and quality in communication are crucial to the operation of an organisation with research highlighting that companies with a high level of employee churn and poor performance may be a result of poor communication and relationships (Sias, 2005). At a basic level, conversation skills serve as a foundation to building strong relationships with good conversation skills influencing acceptance by peers (Hutchins, 2009). It is recognised that there is a strong link between communication and productivity in an organisation and that view is shared by employees and senior staff (Clampitt & Downs, 1993).

In the modern workforce where authoritative power is no longer relied upon as the driver for success, interpersonal skills have become more crucial and employees must become competent at building relationships with colleagues; including those they do not view favourably (Buhler, 2001).

Research shows that open communication has an impact on relationship development and as relationships improve, there is an increase in open communication (Gordon & Hartman, 2009). Denton (1993) proposes that open communication has a direct impact on employee relations and productivity following research into communication practices in several large companies in the U.S.

Research centred on medical students determined that improv workshops which focussed on the development of communication skills had a materially beneficial impact on students progressing into the role of a physician (Shochet *et al.*, 2013).

### **Listening Skills**

It is proposed that listening is the most important aspect of interpersonal skills when it comes to being part of an effective team (Parker, 1990). While listening was once considered a passive process, it is now considered an active process that requires listeners to be fully present and engaged with what is being listened to (Gronnet *et al.*, 2002). Effective listening is essential for success and identified as a key skill for work teams, management and leadership (Johnston *et al.*, 2011).

A study in the accounting industry, identified listening skills being a key skill required as part of effective communication, with research highlighting that participants identifying the significant importance of not just aural listening but also attention to the non-verbal gestures too. (Stone & Lightbody, 2012). The study also highlighted the need for educators to further develop the listening skills of students studying accounting to meet industry requirements (Stone & Lightbody, 2012). Strong listening skills in the workplace improve communication while increasing responsiveness and commitment from employees (Johnston *et al.*, 2011).

Comparably, an improv team requires performers to be attentive to their co-performers in order to achieve success (Johnstone, 1979). Additionally, improv requires performers to be fully present and offer their full attention in the moment rather than focus on prior or future events (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

There can be a perception that there is a lack of control in improv, which can make some participants feel uncomfortable and to help control this, participants learn to utilise other participants for support (Crossan, 1998). Effective communication, including listening, requires participants to collaborate with their peers by giving them their full attention (Crossan, 1998). By listening, it demonstrates support from peers by providing recognition and offering a sense of value of the individual's input, resulting in an increased likelihood of the sharing of ideas and providing opportunity to resolve issues (Johnston *et al.*, 2011).

In summary, the research highlights the essential nature of strong interpersonal communication skills in the workplace with listening skills emerging as a strong sub-theme. There is a strong link between the workplace and the use of improv as a tool to develop these skills, particularly active listening skills.

### **Team Component: Relationship Building**

With adults spending most of their lives at work, one of the key locations for the development of relationships is in the workplace and it is proposed that relationships are key to the well-being of humans (Cole, 2016). Workplace relationships influence decision making and provide support mechanisms, while the quality of the relationships has an effect on the experience of the employee (Sias, 2005). Kram & Isabella (1985) propose that there are three types of peer relationships; information peer, collegial peer and special peer. Each of these relationship types influence an employee's development and provide opportunity for growth in their career development (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Table 2.1 provides brief characteristics of these relationship types.



Relationship Type	Characteristics	Relationship Strength
Information Peer	Benefit through work related information sharing	Low levels of trust and emotional support
Collegial Peer	Provides direct feedback Friendship Increased level of self-expression	Moderate trust and disclosure
Special Peer	Strong bond and friendship Sharing of work and personal information High levels of self-expression	High levels of trust Support for work and personal issues

*Table 2.1 Work Relationship Types (Kram & Isabella, 1985)*

With relationships being a key component of effective teamwork and poor managing of interpersonal relationships having a negative impact on performance (Lepine *et al.*, 2008), comparisons with improvised theatre can be explored. The most successful improvised performances on stage are the scenes where strong relationships between the characters are created (Cole, 2016). Similarly, the relationships off the stage between performers are crucial, as improvisers are required to collaborate closely to create unique shows for audiences and the ability to engage effectively with their co-performers is an essential aspect for achieving this (Cole, 2016). Theatre is one large artistic group relationship, that requires the collaborative talent and commitment of everyone involved (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

The quality of relationships in the workplace can positively influence employee advocacy for an organisation, even during times of crisis (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). Strong relationships encourage trust, improve open communication, increase problem solving skills while aiding job-related stress reduction (Gordon & Hartman, 2009).

The techniques applied through improv influence the participants to collaborate and build upon the fundamentals of improv; “interpersonal presence, co-creation, and heightening

others' ideas", which result in developing positive relationships in the workplace (Cole, 2016, p.42)

## **Trust**

While there is no universal definition of what trust is (De Jong & Elfring, 2010), it has been described in the literature as the degree to which individuals express vulnerability to other people (Khan *et al.*, 2015). Research at an organisational level by Auger (2014) proposes that despite the benefits of trust, trust is delicate and open to influence. Auger (2014) identifies transparency in organisations as a vital component of trust.

Trust in teams is the shared level of confidence of positive expectations from other employees' behaviours (Jong *et al.*, 2006). Trust can be viewed as a change from perspective of insecurity to position of positive anticipations (Jong *et al.*, 2006). The literature shows that trust has an effect on an employee's approach toward performance (Wilderom *et al.*, 2007), (Khan *et al.*, 2015). When team members have a low sense of trust toward their colleagues, they lose focus on the team's objectives and engage in self-serving self-protective behaviours (de Jong *et al.*, 2015). De Jong & Elfring (2010) propose that team managers should be conscious of trust on a team and take an active approach with managing interpersonal relationships and building trust among the team, particularly with ongoing teams. There is further support for this concept in another piece of research, which highlights the importance of being aware of trust levels to ensure teams function effectively (Spector & Jones, 2004).

The literature in relation to improv highlights that improv helps develop trusting relationships through collaborative performance and that improv training in the workplace is being used to develop trust (Cole, 2016). Cole (2016) also highlights that improv encourages collaboration through fun that develops respect among participants and builds up on their trust and by their very nature improv exercises do not require participants to have any prior relationships, so participants are building relationships from the ground up. This echoes other research which states "improvisation builds on affective factors such as trust, respect, and mutual support" (Crossan & Vera, 2005, p.207). Teams are free to improvise in the absence of trust however participants know that they will be supporting in the process and therefore they know are empowered to take risks (Crossan & Vera, 2005).

In summary, there is a broad range of research on the topic of relationship skills in the workplace across an extensive list of professions and industries. Trust emerges in the literature as a sub-theme and with the development of trust being a strong side effect of improv training, there is a link between its effectiveness in the work environment.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the literature highlights that there are many aspects of the team dynamic in the workplace that must be considered for a team to be most effective. The impact of the three components; confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building on team effectiveness is apparent. The research also highlights how improv not only has direct comparisons with both teams and organisation, but also as a training technique can have a tangible benefit with certain components of being an effective team player and building an effective team.

## **CHAPTER THREE - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This section will outline the proposed methodology to be used for data collection for the research. An overview of the research paradigms and themes will be provided and justification for the research method will be outlined. Justification for the structure used for this research will be provided. Finally, ethical considerations and research limitations will also be outlined.

### **Research Themes**

The objective of this research is to determine the usefulness of improv training as a training method to develop effective teams in the workplace with a focus on promoting confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. Firstly, the study will seek to examine the impact of improv training on employee self-confidence in the individual and in turn, team success from engaging improv training. Secondly, the study will examine the effect that improv training had on interpersonal skills within a team. Finally, we will examine how peer and team relationships impact effectiveness as a team through improv training.

As there is a link between the three themes and team effectiveness, the study will examine the impact both before and after participants have taken improv training. A limitation identified by previous research is that while research on improv training in the workplace highlights the positive impact, further research should be undertaken to examine the mediators of the outcome (Cole, 2016). Therefore, the research themes selected are fundamental to examining the impact.

### **Paradigms**

Before the study is undertaken, the researcher must identify a suitable paradigm that complements the topic. The two most common methods are qualitative and quantitative, with the key difference being that a quantitative approach concentrates on numerical data and a qualitative approach focuses on both written and spoken words (Bryman & Bell, 2015). With regards to quantitative research, data collection is retained by way of a research strategy

with hypotheses developed using existing theories (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). In contrast, qualitative research accepts that a variety of perspectives and positions can result from different subjective viewpoints and social experiences (Flick, 2009). For this research, qualitative research was determined to be the most appropriate approach as the semi-structured nature of the interviews will allow for more effective exploratory research (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

## **Research Methods**

Most qualitative research focuses on the interpretation of different representations based on the in-depth knowledge of individual cases (Ragin, 1994). It is recognised that the data from a single organisation can be generalised and context dependent, therefore this research focuses on data collected across multiple organisations (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition, one of the primary limitations identified in previous research on improv in the workplace was that the studies were limited to just one organisation (Daly *et al.*, 2009; Crossan & Vera, 2005). In this study, the twelve participants are employed by twelve different organisations.

The participants in the study are all trained and skilled within their roles with a minimum of 18 months tenure within their organisation. Participants selected work in a variety of roles including; customer support, sales, technical solutions, leadership, finance and human resources. Additional data was collected from participants in a management role. Employer and participant consent has been received in all cases.

## **The Organisations**

The organisations selected are representative of several different industries with a mix of large global organisations and smaller Irish companies. In the interest of maintaining anonymity, the organisations will not be identified by name however the industry they operate in is acknowledged. The industries the company samples operate in include; software, marketing solutions, information technology, education and consulting. Some organisations are headquartered in other countries such as the United States.

## The Participants

All participants in this study are full-time employees of their organisation for a minimum of 18 months. The participant sample is spread across all levels in their respective organisation, from front line staff to management to the executive team. All participants have taken improv training for various durations however, all participants have undertaken a minimum of 18 hours improv training. The anonymity and voluntary participation of participants is stressed along with the confidentiality of all data shared. Confidentiality is often the primary concern of employees in work centric studies (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). The objectives of this study and opportunity to ask questions is shared with participants prior to the interviews. A total of 16 potential participants were contacted and due to scheduling and availability, 12 participants took part in the research and each participant is employed by a different organisation at the time the study was conducted.

Table 3.1 refers to the participants' label, employee status and their respective industry.

Label	Manager/Employee	Industry
M1	Manager	Software/I.T.
M2	Manager	Retail
M3	Manager	Online Marketing Solutions
M4	Manager	Software/I.T.
M5	Manager	Hospitality Technology
M6	Manager	Consulting
M7	Manager	Software/I.T.
M8	Manager	Finance
E1	Employee	Software/I.T.
E2	Employee	Education
E3	Employee	Education
E4	Employee	Marketing Solutions

Table 3.1: List of labels for participants

## **Data Collection**

There are many approaches to data collection available to the researcher (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). However semi-structured interviews were selected due the in-depth probing it permits, and the flexibility offered. Semi-structured interviews were also part of data collection methodology in prior studies on improv training (Daly *et al.*, 2009; Crossan & Vera, 2005).

## **Qualitative Interviews**

Smith (2003) identifies that for qualitative semi-structured interviews, the researcher is required to have a set of questions that will serve as a guide for the interview. The question set for this study was prepared in advance and concentrated on the themes selected from the literature review (Appendix A). In advance of the research, a pilot interview was trialled to test the interview flow and ensure the questions were correctly worded. This also allowed for feedback which proved to be positive. Pilot interviews can encourage credibility in research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

The semi-structured approach will allow for participant flexibility, thus providing opportunity for discussion of points of relevance to them. This also allows for the building of rapport and the ability to probe further (Smith, 2003). It is also acknowledged that questions may evolve as the interviews progress (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). While there was a desire to conduct interviews with participants in-person, there was a mix of face to face and phone interviews. Research highlights that data quality collected by way of phone interview is akin to data collected by interviews conducted in-person (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). However, it should be noted that one of the drawbacks of phone interviews is the lack of ability to read body language (Opdenakker, 2006). It is worth noting that while in-person interviews have been the most common form of interview approach in qualitative research, other interview techniques can be utilised given how technology has caused a massive increase in the forms of communication (Opdenakker, 2006).

A pilot interview was scheduled at the outset of the research to measure the flow and wording of the questions. This also allowed for feedback from the participant. Feedback from

the pilot was positive and resulted in only minor changes to the wording of some questions. No major changes were required and no additional questions were added as a result.

The interviews were conducted throughout the month of January 2018. Upfront communication with participants was made by email and there was occasional rescheduling to accommodate other commitments.

### **Ethical Issues**

The researcher received consent from the Academic Panel of Griffith College prior to contacting participants for the research. The researcher committed to complete confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and all participants were aware of the voluntary nature of the research and the right to withdraw. Names were not recorded during the research and all files and folders in relation to the research was password protected on a non-network computer.

### **Summary**

In summary, the researcher selected qualitative research by way of semi-structured interviews for the purpose of this study due to the probing permitted and the capture of richer data.



## CHAPTER FOUR - DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine the usefulness of improvisation training (improv) as a training method to develop effective teams in the workplace with a focus on promoting confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. Emerging from those components in the literature review were the sub themes of listening skills as part of interpersonal skills and trust as part of relationship building.

### Participant's Perception of Improv

For each participant who undertook improv training, the decision was made in most cases by either their company or manager. In one case, the participant was forced to undertake the training as part of their development.

*It was forced upon me, so I was very anti-doing it (M4).*

While this was the most extreme comment from a participant, the general perception from participants undertaking the training was that of fear and anxiety. The most common positive emotion that emerged was excitement however it was usually accompanied by one of the previous negative emotions.

*I was excited and bit a nervous (E3)*

*Excitement but still like a good bit of fear (M3)*

*A level of social anxiety but excited as I loved theatre workshops (M8)*

*I was excited, really nervous (E2)*

*There were some people that had reservations but personally I was looking forward to it (M5)*

This ties back to Whitcomb's (2013) acknowledgement of the anxiety around improv. In addition to the anxiety, two of the participants also mentioned that they were unaware as to what improv was when prior to taking the class.

While there is a large sample of research on the topic of improv in professional settings, there is limited reference to participant's anxiety regarding undertaking improv training. In the literature, Riveire (2006) and Whitcomb (2013) acknowledge individual's fear of improv and discuss approaches to help participants to overcome the anxiety. However, these studies were conducted in academic environments and the literature would benefit from further research in the professional world with regard to barriers to taking the training.

While most of the comments referenced a negative anticipation, subsequent views post training demonstrates a more positive experience as discussed in the next section.

### **General Experience**

The research shows that all participants valued the improv training looking upon it favourably with several participants specifically referencing that the training was fun or enjoyable in their responses (E3, E4, M1, M2, M3, M4, M6, M7, M8). One participant was more specific when referring to 'play'.

*Education through play is the best education (M2)*

While only one participant referenced play in this research, this comment draws parallels to the view in part of the literature that improv can be constructivist in nature (Henriksen & Mishra, 2017).

Other participants referred to the challenge faced while undergoing the training.

*I found it pushing me outside my comfort zone, so that was really challenging. But overall still enjoyable (M4)*

*It pushed me to the edge of my comfort zone yet remained completely grounded for the workplace context (M8)*

*it's stressful sometimes when you're standing up thinking what I will say next. It was good stress, not bad stress (E3)*

This blend of fun and challenge echoes the literature's view of how improv blends both challenge and fun in the learning environment in the workplace (Daly *et al.*, 2009; Cole, 2016; Rocco & Whalen, 2014).

Two participants commented on how the challenge of participating in improv for the first time was overcome with one participant going as far as highlighting the impact of not knowing what they would be doing in the training session up front.

*In an environment where everybody else is doing it, you just jump in (E3)*

*The idea of getting up in front of people and having to sell something random, if you told me to do that at the beginning I'd say I'm not going to do that. But we got to play together and have a bit of fun (M5)*

This echoes Vera & Crossan (2004) perspective on what improv is and how the fun of the process is shared through the participation and collaboration with others.

While the shared perspective of fun emerged from the research and the literature, one participant made direct correlation with the workplace.

*it sparked a little something and what I enjoyed was just the way you were able to relate it back to the work place all the time (M5)*

## **Teamwork**

Having considered the participant's initial feelings on taking improv, the next section examines into the impact on the components of an effective team.

### **Teamwork Component: Confidence**

When asked about the impact of improv training on their confidence level and their confidence within a team, all 12 participants cited a positive impact. Regarding self-confidence there was specific reference and example to the impact.

*I learned how to stand up for myself. it made me understand how free you can be in your speech and not care of other opinions (E1)*

*You're judging your own words before they come out of your mouth. I think that there's a lot less of that now (E2)*

*My concern with how I thought other's perceived me diminished, while I realised that I should instead focus on pushing myself (M8)*

The two statements below echo the research of Lightle *et al.* (2017) study on auditors, where confidence in how professionals engage with others can have an impact on performance.

*It helped me figure ways as an introvert to be able to network, and now I have no problem walking into a room of people I don't know, it doesn't bother me at all (M3)*

*Egos, especially in the workplace, can be a really prominent feature of office life and they can be really difficult to engage with, so it helped me handle those people a lot better (E4)*

*I was able to lead people always, but I was more scared to do it. And if I had a strong person in front of me, I wouldn't argue. I would start to cry or get very upset, because I think that I will be rude if I will say something against them (E1)*

The following statement ties back to assertions about confidence by Whitehouse *et al.*, (2002) with respect to acknowledging your abilities and limitations.

*There is going to be certain areas where you take the lead, there is going to be areas where you follow, and improv facilitates you being comfortable in any of those (M2)*

One participant referred to the finale showcase event of the improv training and their approach to it. The showcase event is a live improv performance with colleagues in front of an audience and was an optional event for participants. However, the participant appreciated the choice to partake was made by the individual rather than the facilitator.

*Not forcing me to go in the show showcase, where it was my choice to go on and do it by myself (E1)*

*When it comes to doing presentations, trusting that I actually know my stuff and I know what I'm talking about and no-one else has actually seen the presentation before if I do it in a convincing way, people will still believe me and so if I'm batted a question that I don't really know the answer to I'm able to trust that I'll find a way to answer it whereas before I may have been very flustered and panicked because I don't know the answer (E4)*

This was also surmised by the comment, “trust in yourself” (E2), which echoes the research by Gomes & Knowles (2000) where self-confidence reduces negative attitudes allowing for the focus to shift on achieving objectives.

In addition, another participant also drew a link between confidence and trust, “Lack of trust for me came from a lack of self-confidence” (M6). That same participant highlighted how improv orchestrated an improvement in confidence.

*I find myself much more happy and comfortable in even high-pressure situations, interviews or sales situations (M6)*

A similar view was also shared in other comments and by other participants.

*I was terrified of failing, I was always doing it for the approval of others not really for myself. That kind of flipped on its head (M7)*

*I had been taught time and time again in my profession prepare, prepare, write everything down, know what you are going to say, and improv really challenged that perspective. I am much more laid back about preparing for things and consequently more genuine in my interaction with people (M6)*

*Over time I realised that my confidence was growing, partly due to me accepting that I am as fallible as the next person (M8)*

A comment by another participant refined the impact further.

*You have to be true to that scenario. Not true to some other idealised version of yourself (M2)*

Some comments highlighted the increase in their team's confidence and how others perceived the participant's confidence in parallel.

*I'm not as fearful for making mistakes so the rest of the team are the same (M3)*

*It actually made me feel a lot more confident in my team, and I think my teammates looked at me and saw my confidence (E1)*

The latter participant also gave an example of handling a demanding situation in a team setting, where a colleague would regularly fall asleep and how it was handled without the need for escalation.

*One of the team meetings where I had to host it, we had a team member who tends to fall sleep, and that was my very first meeting to host. Before taking improv, I would probably have been very upset, maybe I would have started to cry and run out. However, I just said, 'I'm sorry, would you mind just to respect me and be awake in my*

*meeting and never fall again asleep. I'm not tolerating that'. I got apology. I didn't escalate it. The relationship with that person has been very close since and I have been open about many things (E1)*

This statement and example shows how someone with introvert tendencies in their earlier comment about confidence, *"I would have started to cry and run out"* (E1), demonstrating an extrovert and assertive approach to the issue. This example and the previous statements by participants tie back to the findings of Baer *et al.* (2008) of an extrovert's comfort level with interacting with others while being less concerned with the fear of being evaluated by others as a result. While the research did not specifically ask participants if they considered themselves to be an introvert or an extrovert, much of the study highlights statements that could be considered extrovert behaviours.

While the study highlighted a variety of effects on participant's confidence, all participants noted a positive impact on their confidence in the workplace. Their improv training did not cause a negative or neutral impact on confidence.

### **Empathy**

Participants also referred to taking a more empathetic approach with peers.

*Aware of people's insecurities (E3)*

*We feel grateful for supporting each other (E1)*

*Paying attention to what people are saying and how they are feeling (M3)*

*I was conscious that my own anxieties are often shared by others. When we are in challenging situations, it's very easy to forget that others often share similar views. Being aware of other people's feelings can help give you a sense of where they are at. I was surprised at how this aided my own confidence, just by being aware of how others may be feeling (M8)*

While this study did not directly reference empathy in the interviews and the study only identified limited comments in the interviews, the above references highlight a level of awareness among some of the participants.

### **Teamwork Component: Interpersonal Skills**

In this section, the research focuses on the impact improv training had on interpersonal skills for participants. The research question for the impact on interpersonal was left quite open to avoid influencing participant's responses (Smith, 2003).

Several participants made direct reference to an improvement in "open communication"

*More open communication leads to having a bit of fun and kind of relaxes everyone as well (M3)*

*We have been quite open to ideas. it's almost frowned upon to knock an idea down before it's at least been given a bit of time to breathe (M5)*

*People having seen what can happen when you are more open. They are a lot faster to try and get everyone on board (M5)*

*Being way more open to other people's ideas because probably like a lot of people, I used to think that my idea was the best one and that's the one we should go with. But even if I'm not in total agreement with the idea I'm not shutting it down as much (M7)*

*Communication became more open. As receivers we were more open to feedback, new ideas etc. and as communicators we had the confidence and knowledge to understanding why it's important to be upfront in how we communicate (M8)*

Other participants made indirect reference to open communication.

*Don't shut people down (E4)*



*I'm very sure of myself so some people find that intimidating and unpleasant which shuts them down and they don't speak. So, I try and go back to my confidence and lower my status, to give people freedom to speak their own desires and voice their opinions (M2)*

*I think being able to be more flexible, I've kind of settled down a little bit like I'm, not trying to protect the team from information (M3)*

The above examples are aligned with the literature and how open communication can have a positive impact on relationships and productivity in the workplace (Denton, 1993; Gomes & Knowles, 2000). It also echoes Parker's view (1990) that a manager cannot be a dominant voice if the team is to be most effective.

Despite the openness of the questions, the most common sub theme relevant to the component that emerged in the research was listening skills (M2, E3, M3, M4, E4, M6, M7, M8). This mirrors the importance of listening skills in interpersonal skills and communication in the literature (Stone & Lightbody, 2012; Gagnon *et al.*, 2012). It also reflects Parker's hypothesis (1990) that listening is the most important interpersonal skill when it comes to effective teams.

### **Listening Skills**

Participants made specific reference to how listening was improved.

*Very aware of listening skills (E3)*

*Listening, that's really important, actually paying attention to what people are saying (M3)*

*How people listen and filter, I didn't notice it as much about myself as I did see it in other people (M4)*

*Being very conscious of listening to people and hearing their ideas (M7)*

*Communication became more open. As receivers we were more open to feedback, new ideas etc. and as communicators we had the confidence and knowledge to understanding why it's important to be upfront in how we communicate (M8)*

Drawing parallels with Stone & Lightbody's (2012) research, some participants highlighted how listening goes beyond just paying attention to the words being spoken.

*I've learned to listen to what the relationship is or the status, what people want, what people are saying without saying it. How clear are the signals you are giving off and did they pick up on it? (M2)*

*I realised that we don't often well and truly listen. Listening requires us to pay so much attention to the non-verbal such as body language and tone. If we become too focused on the words, we may miss the underlying meaning or intent (M8)*

One participant made a specific reference to the nature of listening in improv and its parallel importance professionally.

*I always knew, and I'm a fairly successful professional, that I was known for active listening and it is important. But I don't think I ever did it that well. In improv, it only becomes a necessity because you are you there on the stage without a script with whatever ten, fifteen a hundred faces looking at you and you don't know what to say, so you have to listen and learn whatever is being said by your partner and inspire something (M6)*

Another participant highlighted a similar change they introduced to their team following the improv training.

*Now in work. we have an idea session every week and people come up with crazy stuff, but we never say no, we always put it on the list. At the end of the month we decide whether we can go for it or not. So, it's like stuff that has improved; listening to the*

*team, being a bit more patient, probably being a bit less critical if people makes mistakes. When you ask them what they feel like expressing, the other people have to just sit there, and even if it directed at them we can't say anything until the person is finished. So, I guess there is a good improvement in listening skills and patience and being open to criticism (M3)*

The above statements mirror several studies from the literature. Effective communication requires the full attention of peers through collaboration (Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004; Johnstone, 1979), while acknowledging that the quality of results don't always result in moments of excellence but rather an approach to improve the quality of how people interact (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997). Additionally, supporting their peer's ideas without judgment allows for more successful contribution (Shochet *et al.*, 2013; Johnston *et al.*, 2011).

Johnston *et al.* (2011) highlighted in the literature that effective listening skills would lead to a greater sharing of ideas and approach to problem solving. This was demonstrated in participants' comment on how communication has improved on their team following the improv training.

*If there is an issue, people will flag it sooner, so we can get it resolved (M3)*

*Core messages of improv I brought into the team from day one so that when they were starting here, they could have those values and then whatever was going on in the organisation, we as a team were transparent, we knew that it was ok to fail and that we could share mistakes with each other. We could learn from them how important it was to listen to each other and learn from each other (M7)*

Numerous participants made statements about the different approaches to communication that are taken in the workplace.

*I learned what made my colleagues tick and so then going forward I knew how to approach them about something (E4)*

*Regarding teams, just understanding different individuals and their different styles of how they communicate in different ways (E3)*

*The better you are reading what they're saying and not saying, the better able you are to navigate situations (M2)*

*We can still be flexible in how we communicate with each other (M3)*

*The extent to which I plan that interaction; my adaptability to the interaction, the level of leeway I give people, that has transformed professionally (M6)*

These references are similar to the research of Mazzei *et al.* (2012), where it was highlighted that there are many communication roles employees assume in the workplace.

In summary, one participant summarises the impact on interpersonal skills, “Improvements you for interaction with human beings” (M2). This study demonstrated a strong link between improv training and the development of interpersonal skills in the workplace with the emergence of listening skills being a key sub theme similar to the literature.

### **Teamwork Component: Relationship Building**

In this next section, the study explores the impact of improv training on relationship building and development. As both the literature and this research has shown, there are crossovers between interpersonal skills and relationships (Sias, 2005; Hutchins, 2009), and the positive impact that was demonstrated in this study on interpersonal skills.

Several participants referred to support being a part of developing relationships.

*We are working as a team, that means they will support me (E1)*

*Supporting your team and making sure that everyone else is doing just as well and that you're not out for yourself (E4)*

*Support is a big one, not saying no to people when they have ideas (M3)*

*Being more supportive and taking interest in colleagues builds strong bonds (M8)*

These comments are aligned with the research by Sias (2005), that positive support has an impact on the quality of relationships and the employee experience.

## **Trust**

Similar to the component of interpersonal skills, the questions on relationships were open and without leading the questions or answers, eight of the participants put a large focus on the area trust. This is similar to the literature on relationships, where trust emerged as a strong sub theme.

One participant's statement echoes the definition of trust by Khan *et al.* (2015), where trust is defined by the level of vulnerability an individual expresses to others. The participant spoke to what the training revealed to the team about what trust is.

*They all had that kind of revelatory moments after the session, I get it now if I make it myself vulnerable in front of people then I will be able to trust relationships with them much more effectively. I don't think I understood what trust was before improv (M6)*

Other participants spoke about the general impact on trust.

*I learned as well to trust other people more. Not only trust myself, be patient (E1)*

*Trust was definitely better immediately after the training (M1)*

*Trust definitely increased between themselves (M4)*

Two of the participants spoke about transparency and openness being a factor which aided an increase in trust.

*Being flexible has allowed us to be more open and transparent. It's kind of easier to plan as well. It's very transparent, like I don't hide anything from the team anymore. That's going to increase the trust as well (M3)*

*I like to think because we have that transparency that we totally trust each other and have each other's back (M7)*

While the researcher found limited literature on the impact on transparency in teams, the study by Auger, (2014) which was carried out at organisation level, identified the importance of transparency when establishing trust.

Participants also spoke specifically about the process and how they identified the impact on trust.

*If neither of you knew what you were doing, then just trust that neither of you know what you're doing. If it turns out completely rubbish it doesn't matter, you can just build on it. Trust that the people will help you and also trust in yourself (E4)*

*By virtue of doing something scary together and something that pushes you outside your comfort zone, that's the whole intention that you make a bond, it creates a degree of trust that you can't get in a traditional corporate interaction (M6)*

*Our understanding of trust is skewed. I grew to trust my colleagues more by helping create that trust myself. I had always thought that trust is earned, but we have a part to play in creating trust (M8)*

There are parallels with research by de Jong *et al.* (2015), where it was proposed that when team members have a low levels of trust with colleagues, there is an impact on achieving goals and the potential for employees to engage in self-serving activities. However, the participants' comments above demonstrated a greater emphasis on trust during the improv training process while facing challenges in exercises and tasks. This result is similar to the findings of (Cole, 2016) where improv training helps develop trusting relationships by way of

collaborative performances. Similarly, (Crossan & Vera, 2005) highlight that improv builds on trust and mutual support.

### **Stronger Relationships**

Participants also provided comments reflecting on the growing strength of the relationships following the training.

*It really brought everyone together. It really helped for everyone to really see each other in a new light (E4)*

*I think I even have brought them all closer to each other (E1)*

*The team is a little bit more respectful of each other (M1)*

*I'm much more sensitive about my own impact on other people in how I conduct myself. Sometimes people can think they have no impact on other people when they're absolutely draining the life out of them. That's something that I think the self-awareness that improv gives will be beneficial to a wider team (M2)*

*The one thing that I remember is that someone being really vulnerable and hating it in the beginning, and how other people were just helping out with that...so that created a bond with that one girl and a couple of other people who were in the room (M4)*

*I have noticed that the new people who joined the team, almost like a collective effort from everybody to make sure that they were included rather than I suppose sometimes you might just get say the manager who will sort of bring that person in and show them the ropes, it has been more of a group effort (M5)*

One participant also gave an example of how improv training helped establish relationships with a team that there was no prior relationship with.

*We had a recent off site with our wider teams, I'm actually part of a bigger global team in the U.S. and we have nothing in common with one another whatsoever because they are like data scientists and they do completely different jobs to me. So, we have never formed a bond with that team because we just don't get each other. But we did improv together and that definitely helped us a lot to get to know one another. I can definitely see the trust thing between the way that we interacted (M4)*

This further reinforces the research by (Crossan & Vera, 2005) that improv builds on trust and mutual support and research by Cole (2016) which highlights that participants in improv do not require prior relationships for the training to be successful.

Cole (2016) also recognised that improv develops respect among participants through collaborative fun which helps build on trust.

*We definitely have respect that I trust that they will do something, and I feel like the majority of people in the team anyway trust that someone will do something, and it will be what they want, or they'll be able to handle it (E4)*

*I definitely think we're more respectful when people bring up ideas and we're not shooting each other down anymore (M1)*

Participants in this study identified the importance of managers being conscious of trust to ensure teams function effectively which is also a view reflected in the literature (de Jong *et al.*, 2015).

*It has opened my relationship with my manager (E1)*

*It also broke down barriers especially when it came to seniority levels (E4)*

*It broke down barriers in the team (M1)*



*I didn't have a model before for which I could understand my impact on other people until I had done improv (M6)*

*Delegating and empowering my team has become one of my strong skills. While it can create anxiousness, it has resulted in my team feeling more valued, trusted and appreciated (M8)*

While all participants provided feedback on the improvement in relationships after improv training, one participant cited evidence of improvements backed by an internal survey within their organisation.

*That team flattened the hierarchy across 150 I.T. people plus another 100-odd marketing folk through the layers of management, to build trust across functions to the point where the score they use to manage their customers satisfaction jumped by about 70 base points. That is a massive leap. After 18 months they saved 30% of their spend, those were the big figures that demonstrated the impact of improv training with a focus on relationships, trust and interpersonal relationships and the likes and that started with improv (M6)*

In summary, the impact on relationships from improv training was very positive based on this study and the sub theme of trust emerged a strong factor in relationship building. One participant was able to cite evidence from their organisation of tangible improvements in the areas of customer satisfaction and cost saving resulting from improv training which would aligned with the existing literature drawing a link between strong relationships and teamwork directly impacting productivity. All participants highlighted improvements with no negative comments manifesting in the research data.

#### **Other Findings: Peer and Manager Feedback**

As part of the research, participants were asked about peer or manager feedback they have received on their performance that could be linked to the improv training. The majority of participants did have positive feedback, but the responses varied.

*I have been told by my own manager that I have a lot of ideas and it's a good thing. But normally my reaction to that is 'no', you know just to sort of down play it. it's not really a change in the feedback as much, maybe more a change in me being able to take that (M5)*

*Our manager mentioned that as well, that in our team meetings, he thinks we're a lot more respectful about listening to people and not shooting people down anymore (M1)*

*My performance appraisals improved. While my manager never directly referenced improv training, I would contribute improv to being a factor relating to how my ability to manage and be part of a team improving (M8)*

*Before I started improv, I found it quite difficult to run a workshop, like 15-20 people and my business partner would have been present. He was at my first presentation after my improv course and he thought it was amazing how confident I was and how easy it seemed. Yes, he knew I hadn't really practiced as well. So, I think he was very surprised how well it went (M3)*

*It's definitely something that comes up in feedback I personally receive about things like listening skills and things like that. And yeah definitely a confidence thing as well because that definitely comes back to me with a lot of trainings and events that we have been running lately. And I definitely would attribute that to improv (M4)*

*The bit of feedback that I got for myself, come from that team and others in terms of my recent behaviour and personal style was the level of earnestness and genuineness that comes across because I am much more able to harness it. However, the manager himself would say that that team exploded in terms of effectiveness and achievement (M6)*

*People have noticed that I'm less anxious and less skittish and less panicked in my general demeanour in that I think people would say that it loosened me up a little bit (E4)*

*I've had feedback from presentations that worked out very successful (E3)*

While the above feedback is very positive, only two participants referenced feedback directly related to teamwork and team performance. None of the participants or their managers had an evaluation model form part of the improv training. While one participant (M6) did carry out an internal survey which demonstrated improvements resulting from the improv training, the survey was a recurring practice in the organisation and an exclusive initiative to the improv training.

Managers that participated in the survey were also asked about any feedback they shared with their team that could be attributed to the improv training. Only one participant had a comprehensive response.

*One team colleague who is on the training team, I have 100% noticed the difference in how she is more confident in training herself, because that's not her typical background, so definitely given that feedback to her (M4)*

In summary, while there is clearly a strong awareness by participants of their own improvements and that of their team, there was a lack of any formal evaluation methods directly linked to the improv training by the organisations in the study. While there are numerous studies in the literature on approaches to evaluating corporate training, the researcher found no studies on the how frequent and to what extent evaluation of corporate training is carried out.

### **Other Forms of Team Development and Team Building Training**

In this section, the study compared improv training as a form of team development and team building with other forms of team development training or activities that participants had undertaken in their careers. The majority of participants in the study felt strongly about the benefits of improv training and rated it higher than any other form of team training or team building activity.

*Improv training compared to other forms of training is far superior. This kind of improv training I think should be on every curriculum (M1)*

*I don't know that they give you anything to take away with you, whereas improv can (M2)*

*I would think even particularly for sales teams and things like that, it would be up there with the better, the best kind of team building I've done (E3)*

*There is a lot more support that you don't see in other team building events such as shooting etc. Yes, it's fun, but it doesn't build support like you get with improv (M3)*

*I have found typical leadership or team development training to be a cold, one dimensional and empty, whereas just the very fact of having fun together in improv is already an experiential learning experience, however it has to be facilitated well (M6)*

*We should have done more and that has definitely been feedback that we have gotten from the global team. (M4)*

*People talk about it all the time, it still has a really impactful effect on the business and the way people do things, so that's the whole idea of the training... is supposed to last and it's stood its testament of time (E4)*

Some participants also referred to non-training team building activities and why improv taking place in a non-competitive environment made for a more positive experience.

*I've only done a few other things... there always seems to be a lot of competition or seems to be some kind of desire to prove, I'm the best team member.... but also, doesn't necessarily breed the best culture after having done the training (E4)*

*Team building tends to be based on competition and I think it just doesn't make sense to sort of put people in that atmosphere when you want them to work together. So, I think that now when I try to think of a team event or something, I think more along the lines of what can I do that we are collaborating (M5)*

*Most team building activities have a competitive nature to them. While they are fun, they rarely leave you with something to take back to the office. It should be on the training programme in every company (M4)*

While the literature is rich with studies on the benefits of the development of strong teams and team building, the researcher was unable to identify studies which compared different forms of team development training. However the literature does identify that employees generally have negative opinions about team building (Seibold & Kang, 2008). Despite this, a number of participants in the study expressed the view that they would like to see more regular improv training events.

*Ideally, we'd continue that over a much longer time. It's a little bit of a muscle that I need to keep exercising (M6)*

*I definitely strongly believe that it should be part of the training curriculum in every company (M7)*

*And it's one training that stands out that people have done and come back and say, 'can we get more of that?' (M4)*

The findings in this area are quite strong with participants considering improv training to be a very effective form of training and something that should be considered as a recurring training option.

### **Other Workplace Benefits**

Beyond benefits in the area of team development, the study highlighted other improvements and achievements in the workplace that they attributed to their improv training.

*The sales skills come to mind certainly and foremost because that's the biggest impact around having no filters and listening then I try to build that skill into every training that I build now (M4)*

While this research wasn't examining the impact of improv training on sales effectiveness, the participants' view draws parallels with research by Rocco & Whalen (2014) where they demonstrated a material benefit to sales in a study where sellers had undertaken improv training when compared to a team that had not taken the training.

*It definitely helped my instincts so when it came to coming up with new ideas or thinking. Its helped me think on my feet (E4)*

*I've grown to enjoy presenting and public speaking (M8)*

Research by Waisanen & Reynolds (2008) speaks to the benefit of improv in the development of public speaking skills, where speakers can learn to think less about their presentation and instead feel what it is like to stretch their delivery skills.

One participant offered a different perspective as to how the training offered benefits to participants.

*It's not that improv gives you anything you don't necessarily have beforehand. It's more that improv conditions those skills to be repeatable and to be a reflex and habitual rather than something that you've put a lot of effort into to do (M2)*

### **Approaches to Workplace Improv Training and Facilitation**

While all participants in this study had undertaken improv training, the variety of experience and duration of the training taken varied from participant to participant. A number of participant drew attention to the framework for improv to be most successful in the workplace.

*Improv training is something that we need to keep doing and once off wasn't enough if I think we need a refresher or it should be probably built in as an annual thing (M1)*

*Ideally, we'd continue over a much longer time. When I am not doing improv on a regular basis I fall into the habit of taking myself too seriously again, getting too over emotional and not fighting the right battles (M6)*

*I definitely strongly believe that it should be part of the training curriculum in every company (M7)*

*As beneficial as improv is, it feels like it's a muscle that should be exercised regularly to really sow the seeds of change within an organisation. It's very easy to fall back into routine if you have longer absences from improv training or experiences (M8)*

While the literature references different improv training programmes undertaken in organisations and elsewhere, the researcher found limited literature which makes recommendations around the frequency of training.

Participants also referred to the style of trainer and how it impacted the effectiveness of the training.

*It is really important how it gets facilitated (M6)*

*The trainer had a link between the business side, the relationship side and the human side which really helped (M1)*

*The first teacher was so good at making it a level playing field for everybody and there was just nobody who stood out as the best or the worst. It made for such a good team environment and I think everybody felt really close. I certainly felt less of that imposter syndrome (M7)*

One participant highlighted how their facilitator made references to the business world by way of examples on how improv techniques could be applied in the workplace and team setting. One example highlighted by the participant was about an employee asking for annual leave during a busy period for the organisation which would normally be rejected. The example resonated with the participant who was able to apply the approach in their own team.

*There was actually one specific story that he told... he applied the whole 'yes and' idea. That had the biggest impact with me, because since then there has been some moments like the project I'm working on. We tend to have two weeks where it's not so busy but there is two weeks where it's full on and we need all hands-on deck. Someone I was working with needed two days off during the busy, but I felt let's try and work with it. And you know what it happened, and it proved that thinking does apply well, so that was the biggest impact for me. (M5)*

*As I participated in theatre outside of work, I was unsure as to how improv, as a form of theatre, could be made relevant to the workplace. However, the facilitator had a business background and was familiar with our company's culture. This allowed for what felt like a more relevant training session as he was able to bridge the gap between improv and business (M8)*

While this study did not focus on an improv trainer's pedagogy, the above quotes indicate a certain sensitivity to how improv in the workplace is facilitated. The researcher found limited research on the pedagogical practical of improv trainers in a professional setting. Despite the study not specifically examining the training approach, the study does suggest that improv training in the workplace benefits further when the facilitator is making direct connections between the benefits of improv and how it fits in to the corporate world. However, this study does not identify the absence of a link between theatrical improv and business from a facilitation perspective to be detrimental to the training's effectiveness.



## **Summary**

In summary of the data analysis, the research indicates a strong impact on the development of the team competencies of confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building with sub theme developments in the areas of listening skills and trust through improv. The research also highlights a strong preference to improv training over other forms of team development and team building training or events. It is apparent that while there were no formal evaluation methods used by the organisations in the study, the positive impact identified by participants suggests a strong improvement to team effectiveness and other areas of professional development.

## **CHAPTER FIVE - CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

The objective of this research is to determine the usefulness of improvisation training (improv) as a training method to develop effective teams in the workplace with a focus on promoting confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building. Mitchell *et al.* (2010) identified a lack of soft skills as a weakness in the modern workforce with Robles (2012) proposing that teamwork, interpersonal skills and strong communication among the top 10 soft skills that employers identify as being critical for successful organisations. This highlights the importance for organisations and employees to develop their soft skills to meet the demands of the professional world.

In research by Seibold & Kang (2008), respect and trust, strong communication and empowerment of team members were among the elements they proposed as components of teamwork. While it is recognised that teamwork is essential in any organisation, research also identifies that it needs to be even more effective at senior levels of an organisation (Wei & Lau, 2012).

The results of the researcher's study highlight that improv training can have a strong, positive effect on the development of teamwork skills and effective teams in the workplace. The research demonstrates how improv training develops the individuals' skills such as confidence and interpersonal skills, while simultaneously developing the relationships of colleagues and their own ability with relationship building skills. This aligns with the literature where it is recognised that individual behaviour is a key attribute of the success of a team (Prescott *et al.*, 2012).

### **Confidence**

Regarding the component of confidence, this study recognises how improv training can develop the confidence of individuals both from a self-confidence perspective and confidence within a team. While the researcher found limitations in the literature with the link between confidence and the individual's perception of their abilities by their peers, this was an element

that arose in this study in how participants considered their confidence to grow. The literature does however recognise that the more confident the employee, the less prevalence of negative attitudes resulting in the focus shifting to positive results (Gomes & Knowles, 2000).

This study highlights how participants learned to be more confident by giving less consideration to their own perception of how they are perceived by their peers. There is reference to participants identifying as introverts developing the ability to network with people they are meeting for the first time as well as developing the confidence to handle peers who may be considered a more confident colleague.

The view of the researcher based on the research is that confidence is a choice, with some participants referencing being able to make a choice on a matter and placing trust in yourself.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Strong interpersonal skill, which includes open communication and a competency with listening skills, are essential when it comes to team effectiveness (Parker, 1990). Both open communication and listening skills emerged in this study as strong themes in interpersonal skills. In this study, open communication improved through an increase in flexibility, the ability to take feedback and being open to other people's ideas and thoughts.

The majority of participants in the study indicated an evolved awareness and ability with listening skills, noting an improvement in the reading of other people and recognising the importance of non-verbal which aligns with research on effective listening skills by Stone & Lightbody (2012). Based on this study, the researcher also believes that the ability to read colleagues and other teams also forms part of reading the non-verbal as part of listening skills.

Research in the medical profession, found a link between strong communication skills and career progression (Shochet *et al.*, 2013) suggesting that not only does strong interpersonal skills aid team effectiveness but can positively impact career development.

## **Relationships**

The workplace is one of the primary locations where the development of relationships is key given most adults spend most of their lives at work and relationships are key to the well-being of humans (Cole, 2016) and key to successful teamwork (Lepine *et al.*, 2008).

This study highlighted a greater level of support among participants, with some groups indicating a collective effort to support their peers. Reference to an awareness of how one's self can impact relationship development was also made. Support is identified as two ways, recognising the support received from peers and both taking an interest in colleagues and offering support aids relationship building.

Trust emerged as a strong theme with relationships with several participants commenting on the improvement in the level of trust among their team. Research by Wilderom *et al.*, (2007) and Khan *et al.*, (2015) show that trust in an organisation has an impact on employee performance. Some participants highlighted how strong trust is among their peers, allowing for strong collaboration in the face of challenge, suggesting that if trust is high, teams will work more closely together to ensure success and feel comfortable knowing that they have the support of their colleagues. Transparency, flexibility and openness emerge in this study as factors that influence trust with a particular emphasis on collaboration.

Existing literature highlights the positive impact that improv has on trust and collaborative effort (Cole, 2016; Crossan & Vera, 2005) and this study gives some example as to how improv training achieves this.

## **Recommendations for Organisations**

All participants spoke to the positive impact of improv training on the development of effective teams and other aspects of their professional lives, which leads to a number of recommendations organisations could consider.

### **Recommendation One: Consider improv for team development or team building training**

This study highlights the benefit of focussed effective teamwork and team building training through improv rather than other forms of team training, including fun or social team

building. The literature highlights how there is a difference in perception between what teambuilding is and what is delivered with teambuilding often shunned as a development option (Seibold & Kang, 2008). However, when comparing improv training for teams with other forms of team building, the results from this study showed a large preference for improv.

**Recommendation Two: Consider improv for confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship training**

Taking each component in isolation, this study highlights a significant positive impact on each of these soft skills in the workplace. Consideration should be given to utilising improv in this area.

**Recommendation Three: Integrate improv as part of the company training curriculum**

Organisations who are considering an effective form of team development training as part of their training offerings, could consider integrating improv training into their curriculum. Given the benefits highlighted in this study, organisations may consider improv training taking place at the point of entry for an employee in an organisation; induction. In the literature, a study by Daly *et al.* (2009) on an airline, featured improv training as part of the employee induction process.

**Recommendation Four: Consider improv as a recurring training offering**

Most participants spoke to the lasting and tangible positive improv achieved from taking improv training. Furthermore, several participants felt that improv training should be a recurring feature on organisational training offerings. Several participants referring to improv as a 'muscle' that should be trained regularly.

**Recommendation Five: Implement training evaluation**

While none of the organisations represented in this study formally assessed the impact of improv on the organisation, one participant was able to demonstrate a substantial benefit of improv training due to an improvement in customer satisfaction and a reduction in expense by way of a separate survey.

The literature highlights how employees and employers can be averse to participating in team building training, therefore it is prudent to implement an evaluation model to ensure the value of improv training can be demonstrated to stakeholders.

### **Future Studies**

This research highlights the positive impact of improv training in teams however several limitations are also apparent throughout. There are also many gaps in the literature which highlights a need for more research in the future.

Future studies would benefit from researching the impact of anxiety on taking improv training and the potential barrier to training as a result. Additionally, research into developing evaluation models for improv training would add value in demonstrating the impact of improv training on performance results, for example impact to sales, customer satisfaction and employee churn.

### **Summary**

This chapter concludes the dissertation by revisiting the themes and purpose of the study, making recommendations to organisations and suggestions for future studies.

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## APPENDIX A

### Research Information Sheet for Research Interviews

My name is Neil Curran, and I am conducting a study to research **“The usefulness of Improv as an effective method to promote confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building as important components of successful teams in the workplace”** in part fulfilment of my MA in Training and Education at Griffith College Dublin.

The purpose of the research is to examine the effectiveness of improv training in teams within the workplace with a particular focus on the following components:

- Confidence
- Relationship building
- Interpersonal skills

This research will add to the existing academic research on team effectiveness and improv in the workplace.

You have been invited to take part in this research because you recently participated in improv training with your team in your company. I am interested to hear your views about the experience, in particular how improv has affected the above-mentioned components for you and your team.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to take part in this inquiry. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any point up to 1 calendar week after your interview without having to provide a reason. You can also be assured that all information you share with me will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and your comments/contributions will be anonymised both in terms of your name, and the institution you work in.

Your role in the research is to be interviewed by myself and it is expected that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. With your permission, the session will be recorded, and



anonymised transcripts will be used for analysis. On completion of the analysis of all participant interviews, the findings will be published in the form of a Masters dissertation and where possible, in appropriate journals or presented at appropriate conferences at a future date.

The benefit of you taking part in the research is informing industry and education bodies about the effectiveness of improv training in the workplace and adding to existing research in that area.

Once I have completed the research, I give you my personal assurance that I will destroy all recordings, notes and transcripts. In the meantime, all information will be stored on my laptop, with back up on a USB memory stick – both of which will be encrypted.

Griffith College's Ethics Committee granted permission for this research in November 2017.

Please feel free to contact me at [neilcurranireland@gmail.com](mailto:neilcurranireland@gmail.com) or +353 86 6018344, at any time if you have any questions regarding this inquiry.

Many thanks.

Neil Curran

**APPENDIX B**  
**Research Consent Form**

I have read the attached information letter, which explains the research Improv as an effective method to promote confidence, interpersonal skills and relationship building as important components of successful teams.

I understand that the letter is asking me to participate in a focus group.

I understand that all the information gathered will be kept strictly confidential and that my name and the name of my employer will not be included in any reports.

I understand that this inquiry is using an interview as part of the data collection phase, and analysis and interpretation phase.

I understand that my contribution will be recorded, but that transcripts will be anonymised.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent up to 7 calendar days after completion of my interview.

I understand that this research will be published in form of a Doctoral dissertation and, where possible, in appropriate journals, or presented at appropriate conferences.

☐ **I AGREE** to taking part in the above research

☐ **I AGREE** that I have not been coerced in any way to take part in the above research

**Print Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please feel free to contact me at [neilcurranireland@gmail.com](mailto:neilcurranireland@gmail.com) or +353 86 6018344, at any time if you have any questions regarding this inquiry.

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Schedule

Prior to taking improv training:

- How confident did you consider yourself to be as part of your team? (should you prompt them? In terms of a scale?)
- How confident did you consider your team to be as a fit within your organisation?
- How would you describe the old communication style of your team?
- What was the climate of trust like within your team?
- How would you describe the old relationship between your team and your customers (internal or external)?
- What were the challenges your team faced?
- How effective did you consider your team to be within the organisation?

Post improv training:

- How did you feel when you heard you were doing improv training?
- Tell me about how you found the experience?
- Describe your experience and feelings from taking the improv training?
- In what areas do you feel the training had an impact to you and your team?
- Did the training reveal or make you self-aware about any aspect of your team?
- What is the climate of trust like within your team?
- Has there been any change in the relationships of the team members?
- What impact has the training had on communication within the team and with other colleagues?
- What were the main learnings you took from the training?
- Have you seen any behaviour changes in yourself or your team since the training?
- Has any feedback been provided to you from your manager or peers since undertaking the training?
- How would you rate your team effectiveness now?
- How would you compare the training with other forms of team development or team building you have participated in?

#### Additional questions for managers

- Have you observed changes relating to confidence, interpersonal skills and/or relationship building in your team and have you given feedback to that effect?
- Are there any other areas of your team where you have seen the training have an impact?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: PARTICIPANT M7**

Hi there so as I said interview with two halves, first half before I probe, second half after I probe and I'll let you know when we transition. So what we are looking at is improv specifically in the team about team, so I'll have some general questions and some questions that are kind of specific to skills that we are looking at. So starting at the start. So before you did improv how confident did you consider yourself to be in a team setting before you took improv training?

**I probably was quite confident anyway but I would always have depending on the team I was in. So if it was just my team which I have been in for a good few years, then I know my place in that team and I was confident. But if I was in a meeting for example or a project team with people who were a lot more senior than me, or I perceived to be more senior or more experienced, then I would have the typical imposture syndrome, what am I doing here, I don't believe in myself, and what is actually coming out of my mouth, I sound as if I don't know what I'm talking about, that kind of thing. So with a team I was familiar with, yeah I would be very confident, with a team I wasn't familiar with or that I perceived to be more experienced, more senior than I was, I would quite often feel like I didn't have a place there, I shouldn't be there.**

Ok so, in terms of your own team before improv, how confident did you consider your team to be as a fit within the organisation?

**Our team we have a kind of strange team as in, we nearly describe what we do as miscellaneous all the projects that other people won't take on. So we work in a sales organisation supporting them but not in a revenue way, in a people way, so like employee engagement, employee experience, hiring graduates or hiring different types of profiles that wouldn't traditionally come into permanent roles here. So our overall teams fit, we always feel a little bit like the outsiders and my own team of interns are grads, I think they grad programme has such a structure that I put a structure on that so that they are very happy and confident and settled here and they have lots to do and they feel like they are contributing to the business and they are and everybody is delighted and sees the value in them. And the interns on my team fall under that place of miscellaneous as well. So well I hope that I give the confidence that they are adding value...does that answer that?**

Yes that answers, totally honest there is no wrong answer. So in terms of your approach to communication and communication style of the team, what did that look like before improv?

**My communication with my team certainly could have been more structured, I would say I do that, I look into the distance it looks like I'm looking at something but I'm not! I actually already did that today once...and everyone always goes like, what is she looking at and I'm not looking at anything! So do you mean me as a manager?**

Both because you are the manager so you are kind of I guess you create the benchmark of what is common practice and communication so how you approach communicating and how you would feel to your team was with communicating.

**So, within our team even though we are very close we actually could be quite siloed and then sometimes that leads to would lead to crossing over on tasks, so not one person doing the same thing in a different way than another person and working kind of almost on clashing projects. Also we have people on our team who aren't based here, so that's an extra layer of complication to communication. With me as a manager, I'm quite informal with my communication style, I would say before improv and after improv was...well I do a comparison?**

We'll get to after, don't worry.

**Yeah so, I think with my team I'm trying to think what I was like before. Naturally a bit...do with a bit of improv naturally anyway. But I'm kind of struggling to know what that means as well, as in one on one communication, my personal silo communication or how I would structure my one to one meetings?**

Well even if you talk about your personal silo communication because you are the manager so it gives me a flavour then for how the team perceive you then. It's more about your approach to it.

**Ok, well I'm very very open and very honest and probably almost too much sometimes like going...probably sharing too much with the people even interns like being extremely open with my communication. I feel like that because if you are really transparent then people trust you and then you get more out of them. Although sometimes I feel like I have shared too much and then I need to know when to pull back out of the balance of professionalism with being open and being a manager who is cool but not like a best friend either, which the balance I have struggled with.**

Sure ok, so what was the climate of trust like in your team before you took improv and again giving consideration to your approach because you are the manager, so your approach to creating trust what was that like?

So my approach to creating trust was, I think I have struggled with delegation in the past and you really need to be able to delegate to create trust because if people only start feeling like you trust them when you give them ownership and responsibility of tasks, where because I was a new manager I found it hard to delegate certain things, because I thought I could do them better. And then it's about then learning that you can't always do them better, sometimes there is people who have strengths or they can do them differently, so there is not necessarily a better and worse, there is just a way of doing things differently. But I found for me giving people responsibility ownership, giving them projects to own from start to finish, was one way that because I was trusting them then they would trust me and go that extra mile, because they really want to do an amazing job on it then. So really saying you know what, this is your project, you have a freedom on it, we'll check in at this point and this point. Even come to me for advice if you need it, but if you are not coming to me and it's fine and then let's roll it like that. So I think giving people the responsibility was one thing and then even though I said I was a bit maybe too open, I think it's really important. So I think it's really important if I'm having a bad day and I even say I'm having a bad day today this is why and whatever. And that way the people on my team would be the same with me and obviously I want to make sure that they are ok and if there is something going on with them then they are able to be really open with me.

Ok so again you can see there is a trend to these questions, so the same question expect substitute trust with relationship building. So how would you have described your approach to building relationships and maintaining relationships and also how your team would do it as well?

Yeah, it's because of the nature of interns coming in and out, they come for 6 months and 10 months and then they are left again. But manage quite strong relationships with them. And for me it's enabling them to build the relationship they need to do their projects and get the most out of the experience here. So, I would at the start I would set up informal meetings, that's what I would have always done, as in ok so this is the person just meet them, get to know them for a start not with an agenda, just saying I want to introduce the new intern to the team. And then again given them the trust then to meet other people who are more senior and not have it a thing that oh that person is more senior you can't meet with them, be careful talking to them. I'm like no actually go for it and then obviously I have to take the responsibility if something goes wrong with that. But normally it doesn't. Everybody is human. So when they meet regardless of level it's usually fine. But I would have to set the expectation of if you are meeting with somebody who is at a certain level in the organisation you have to make sure you go into that meeting with an agenda and you have to, because that's a way of killing a relationship with someone like that, they are not going to give you their time again if you waste their time without going in with a clear agenda, without blocking the time on their calendar properly. And that kind of thing. But building relationships, I guess what...actually what I always do with the grads is, I would set up like a crazy task or whatever like a team building thing, but I would send them off in teams around Dublin and set up different tasks at different spaces in Dublin. And of course, because it's me I post stuff on social media! And then but by doing that, by kind of making, having the craic they all respond really quickly.

Cool, so and overall general terms, how effective did you consider your team to be in the organisation?

**I would say my team were at a level of, I think that we knew what we were about a lot less, see I've a few difference teams I have the interns, the grads and then my team so.....**

And that's ok and again they won't have all gone through improv training so it's thinking about your perspective on it

**My perspective? Yeah so I would say 6 out of 10 effectiveness level.**

I've only got an audio recorded so we can't see your head movements on this, ok cool. So that just really gives me a sense of like life before improv and don't assume that things have to have been bad and then something got good because that's not what I'm after

**No I was brilliant before and after.....**

Well we have that on the tape and as I said no one knows who you are. So now I'm going to ask questions specific to after you had improv and even looking at some of the improv things you did with your team.

**Yeah**

So when you first signed up to doing improv how did you feel about it before you had even set foot in the door how did you feel about signing up to improv?

**I was really excited but I didn't really know what I was getting myself into so obviously I had heard of improv I hadn't seen much improv apart from what everyone had seen on telly, Who's line is it anyway? I had been involved in the comedy world I knew some comedians and I was sort of interested in it from a comedy perspective at first so my but how I was feeling was excited, dying to do something new and something creative and something performance based as well excited.**

Cool. So generally speaking how did you find the experience? So thinking about you know what you went through, oh yeah and this doesn't just relate to me this is any improv training you've done by the way. How did you find the experience overall of learning improv?

**Amazing like completely changed my perspective not about how I felt nearly about everybody else but how I felt about myself, gave me a different type of confidence cause I was always able to perform like even since I was a child I would get up and perform for people like that was never an issue for me but it was not.....it was different for me I still was terrified of failing I was always doing it for the approval of others not really for myself and that kind of flipped on its head and even the very first class I was in improv was like don't try it to be funny don't try it to be entertaining don't try it and I was like oh shit ok this is what I'm always doing I'm always trying to be entertaining, I'm always trying to be funny and now I have to not try and do that and there is I guess an incredible amount of pressure that you take off yourself when you realise that so when I first.....like the first**



course after it I felt really good about myself, felt a lot more able to deal with different situations in work that I would have maybe panicked about or got this awful feeling about but kind of like you know what like this is grand like its fine its ok and I went back to that its ok to fail thing because like big deal so you know I was more relaxed I think then so that sort of changed.....I honestly gave less of a shit about my place in the hierarchy and felt like I was more equal with everyone.

Sure ok. So then generally speaking during the experience of learning improv what kind of feelings did you kind of have during the process what were the thoughts associated with it?

Feelings.....the feeling of being present, so I'd done meditation before but this was like a two and a half three hours of completely being in the moment, listening, having fun, sometimes feeling emotional like when you're playing out different emotions actually really really genuinely feeling them emotions, linking in to maybe how you are emotionally feeling in your life, more in tune with my emotions actually and more accepting of whatever emotion was happening at the time. Really a kind of a sense of being in a world where you are accepted and you were just being yourself and if you were kind of going too far into performance mode or you know it didn't feel as right so it was that kind of more natural.....and also because of always it sort of felt sort of like at home as well because I would always be seen as like the crazy one on the team or whatever and now I was just among other crazies even though they're weren't but like it was.....it was very accepting.

Ok so in what areas do you feel the training had an impact on you and the approach to teamwork?

So the biggest thing was listening....which I could really really link in and share with my team and share with the sales grads because they are going to be sales people and the biggest skill they need to have is listening and that it's ok to fail and by fail I kind of was relaying to them that it's ok to not be so serious in this environment, like a corporate environment you can be yourself, you can have fun, you can do things that other people aren't doing and you can be seen as being really innovative and really standing out and adding more value because you're doing that so for example in.....when the sales guys start I do an induction with them and the last time after I had done the improv the first thing I did was an exercise that we did in class which was just simply like getting everyone to stand forward and say their name really confidently and I just did it like a say your name as if you are really someone you know and like I suspected like I was in class they then did not remember anyone else's name so it was just a listening exercise at the very very beginning and how if you are so focused on yourself and what you are doing, then you can lose so much of what is going on around you. So I did that and then other things that I probably wouldn't have done before I think I was kind of more myself like we shared like stories at the beginning and the messages, the kind of core messages of improv I brought that into the team from day one so that when they were starting here they could have those values to work there and then we could be even if whatever was going on in the organisation us as a team were transparent we knew that it was ok to fail and that we could share mistakes with each other as well and we could learn from them how important it was to listen to each other and learn from each other and that kind of thing.

Ok. So the improv training has it revealed anything to you about yourself or made you self-aware about anything in your work life or your team?

**Self-aware.....**

Or any realisation about what you do in the workplace?

**I think it was that I could bring that side of myself more into work whereas sometimes I maybe would have thought that was a bit too alt for a place like this but when I started telling people about it like the things I was learning in improv and how I felt that could be applied to sales everyone was so interested and wanted actually they were like can you do a workshop, can you get somebody in to do one, can you.....I can see how that would work and everyone was really impressed rather than going you're so crazy they were like wow that's so cool. So I think if anything it was more just be yourself and you don't really have to have a work face and a personal face you can have a mixture of the two.**

Ok the next set of questions are about specific aspects that I am looking at within qualities of a strong team, looking at trust and the kind of things we talked about earlier, trust, communication and relationship building.....or relationships. So what is the climate of trust like within your team now, now that you've gone through improv and you've taken what you've learned away with you and done some with your team, what's the climate of trust now like now in the team?

**I think we..... I think we totally trust each other.**

What gives you that impression?

**Well I'm speaking from my..... I trust every single person on my team implicitly I could.....I suppose my biggest thing is I give more ownership to people working for me and they.....I am comfortable to do that so from my side the trust I mean you'd probably have to ask them if they trust me completely but I like to think because we have that transparency that we totally trust each other and have each other's back. I'm probably really lucky with the team I work with.**

Has there been any change in your approach to relationship building and maintaining amongst the team or your colleagues or indeed their approach?

**In terms of relationship building I think I unless I can say again like just more openness but I probably would have a similar approach to relationship building...**

So improv hasn't changed how you approach relationships or your team or any skills you'd use with your team around maintaining relationships, and no is still an acceptable answer I'm just trying to pry and see if there is anything?

**Yeah like I.....a sense of team like I'd say that's improved teamwork because I've done workshop with my team like even the people when they all come over to Dublin I did a workshop where we were able to just also again just sharing the core, well what I see as**

the core values from my experience doing improv training that sharing those with my team and then relating them back to stuff that we do so I think an overall sense of feedback from that from other people to me was that was so cool that we did that and like we went off then and did a different team thing together and it felt like after being a bit silly with each other that we were able to bond more as a team so I think in that sense and then for example even like with the grads like I would have them out for dinner and we would do just a little like a story together, just making up stories and stuff like that which they had thought I was absolutely nuts when I told them we were going to do that but then they were like we love it and as I was getting the feedback for the next round of [25:42] and they were like do the story thing that you did with us do the story thing with us and I was like ok but do you think I can do that at the start or when I get to know them and they were like mmmmm maybe not on the first day but do it with them when you're out.

Cool. So then again same question, but just on communication, is there anything you have taken back to the workplace on communication, your approach to communication, anything changed?

My approach to communication I would say again, yes and actually I forgot to mention this one being way more open to other people's ideas cause probably like a lot of people I used to think that my idea was the best one and that's the one we should go with but even if I'm not in total agreement with the idea I'm not shutting it down as much so where before I might have said.....so for example the interns are very new, the grads are very new and they might come up with an idea that it would have been very easy for me before I did improv to say do you know what I've been here now for seven years and we did that idea six years ago and it didn't work so we're not going to do it again whereas now I definitely do not think to say no straight away I think to say yeah it's a great idea and have you thought about how we could execute it or lets talk about it a bit more, lets get more ideas so I'm not like saying no to ideas. Not that I.....I'd like to think I was open to new ideas in general but I definitely noticed after going to improv I found myself noticing when I was saying yeah but or no but or no because..... that really stayed with me actually.

Cool that's a good one. So overall then what are the main things you've taken from improv?

The main things I've taken from improv is one, improv is like meditation it's something you can do for yourself to take some time out of the everyday drudge and when you're feeling like stressed you can.....I would do it sometimes now even with someone on the team I would say can we go and be like have a mess for ten minutes and then we'll feel so much better or if a meeting is going.....if I'm in a meeting with people I know really well and it's going just absolutely nowhere I might just start like going a bit off the wall with it and bring it back but sometimes I think it's like a little escape to get you back on track, so I feel it's like a time out that helps me be more productive. I like was saying already being very very conscience of listening to people and hearing their ideas and not saying actually..... very rarely..... while protecting myself and my ability to do to not to ten things at the same time I try to say yes to most things. Now obviously you have to prioritise and you can't say yes all the time but I try and find a way of saying yes to a lot of things so that I'm expanding my network, working on different types of projects and definitely I've done things since I've done improv that I don't think I would necessarily have been able to do before like MCing

events, I've done well workshops with teams that have had people in them that before I would have been maybe too intimidated to go in and do that kind of workshop and I..... definitely helped me with....there's been things for example doing training with the new hires I had a technical situation where everything was going wrong technically and I just didn't panic I was just like it's grand, I'll do it without the technology. So I think staying a bit calmer, like taking a few breaths, taking a pause and going what's the worst that can happen here the technology's not working but I still know what I'm supposed to talk about, I can get people interacting and get a discussion going and it'll be grand. So not like losing my shit when something is going wrong with the technology or whatever just going right it's going to be grand.

I just want to ask you a question because you mentioned when you take a timeout and you go wild, what exactly happens or is it just.....

Oh yeah I do it all the time, I do a lot naturally I get up and just take a different character on or I might do.....well like I juggle at my desk anyway but then I might juggle and then go into a different character. I might do.....I've done things in the emotion game with a couple of my team just pass around the emotion ball just to get us, I mean they think.....they laugh at me when I'm doing it but they all actually like it you know.

So you use the exercises?

I use the exercises and then sometimes I'll just do a monologue or whatever and people will be like you're crazy.

Brilliant

Yeah

So have you seen.....and I know you've given a lot of information already so you don't have to overlap with anything you've said, have you seen any behaviour changes in yourself or your team since taking improv?

Probably it would just.....it would mainly overlap but maybe more a confident team, maybe I think I'm.....I think I'm enabling people who are on my team to be more confident, to be confident from the beginning and just let them fly you know?

Let them fly

Yeah

We're nearly there I promise, we're nearly there. So have you had any feedback from your manager or from any of your colleagues since you've taken improv training where you would say yeah improv has been a part in playing in me getting that feedback?

Well yeah probably from that training that I.....so I designed a new trainer [33:14] strategy to the new hires, they're still using it now but I've stepped out of the delivery because I was

just doing the first few until somebody else could take it over but I would say like after I did that like I was getting asked if I would go back to training and be on the training team and then my boss would be saying to me oh I've got really good feedback from the training director about you, you know delivering the training. I got like stuff from new hires that were in my sessions saying you know that it was better than competitors trainings they had been in and I do think that a lot of my.....the way I was interacting with people like and reacting to them and listening to them and personalising things with them I think that the improv really helped me with that. Because before I might have been like you know more like I was doing a show but this is me I don't want anyone else involved and I would try and make sure that everyone was involved and remember things that they say to me so that I can customise it and personalise it and refer back to it which I think then people get really engaged in if you make people feel special like other then.....like she talked about me, talked about the thing I did so.....

So overall how would you rate your team's effectiveness now?

Our.....I think we have.....and actually I never mentioned earlier that when I did the improv with my team it was about us creating our vision mission statement, and the reason I wanted to do that type of workshop was I knew there would be a lot of ideas come forward and I didn't want anyone to be shutting anyone else down and I wanted us to work really collaboratively to come up with that. Now we've struggled to come up with one vision for our team but I think we had a lot better idea of our direction and we came up with a whole list of things at that workshop that we knew where we added value so I think in terms of we might have been adding the value anyway but I think it gave us a better sense of the value we were adding so therefore our confidence was improving, therefore our effectiveness was improving nine out of ten.

Great! So the last few questions. What would you.....sorry.....comparing improv training as a form of team development and team building, how would you compare it with other forms of team development and team building you have done?

I would say it's the best team development training you could do, so other stuff I've done is oh like I mean team work stuff like clay pigeon shooting this kind of craic like for team bonding that doesn't really work so in terms of getting a team together, getting ideas flowing I haven't come across anything better than improv to do that. I definitely strongly believe that it should be part of the training curriculum here.

Here in the company or.....

Yeah, in every company. I think it should be a training that sales people get because there's huge things especially people that for a start they have a fear of inside sales where they have to pick up the phone and do cold calls and there's such hugely valuable things that they can learn from improv even though it seems like it's so far from sales training but it's not. And you can definitely link that up. I think managers could all do with it, so many people take themselves way too seriously they need to shake it out and realise that like it's not the end, nobody is coming in here and changing lives either like so kind of stop taking yourselves so seriously and then you might be a nicer person to work with and nicer to

everyone around you and nicer to the people on your team. So I think for managers, managers with their teams, separate manager training for improv, separate teams with the manager training and new hires sales training I think there is a place for team development and then they can yeah keep doing it.

Ok cool. And then in terms of any teachers, improv teachers you've worked with personally, is there anything with their approach to teaching that you know was of particular benefit to you or facilitated your learning, anything that stands out?

Yeah I think with the first improv course I did I think no matter what different types of people are in the group, whatever their level of confidence, previous experience, perceived experience whatever it is, the first teacher was so good at making it a level playing field for everybody and there was just nobody who, nobody stood out as the best or the worst and it made for such a good team environment and I think everybody felt really close because I certainly felt less of that imposter syndrome then because I was here I was meant to be here I feel equal to people – yes there is always going to be times that you don't but it was constantly reinforced there is no wrong way to do this, so that created such a safe environment that you actually pushed yourself out of your comfort zone, you actually explored things that you would have been too embarrassed to explore or felt like you couldn't do that, so it was definitely a sense of creating that kind of environment and then there were different things like everything kind of came together in each class and over the course as well that like you could see why we did that, why we did that, why we did that so I think it was the structure as well of where things were placed and I think definitely in the first course I did it was just pushing people to the right level of their comfort zone and then pushing a little bit further and then pushing a little bit further and by the week we did the character development which was I think the most out of everyone's comfort zone, and could be an emotional one even, that's.....we were ready for it and we were comfortable as a group so that was where everything was structured and definitely that sense of feeling safe, feeling like you belonged, feeling like no matter what you did it wasn't going to be wrong but at the same time being.....having some constructive feedback if there was.....for example at the start like that thing that can be easy like to maybe use bad language or to like go to the sexual jokes or stuff.....which when you think of improv or before you do improv you think that might be where you would go and then you realise it's so much better if you don't go there so that sort of.....and you have to be more creative then so I think that helps your creativity. So just that kind of thing, just learning from stories and it also felt like everybody got any equal chance to shine, nobody was the star but everybody was equal and that was the biggest thing. Probably then with the more recent ones there has been more of a focus on movement which is very out of my comfort zone and that's something, I'm finding that part really really hard but I'm trying to push myself to explore that side more in this course I probably do feel like the levels are different but I think that's a personal thing with me being really badly coordinated and a bad dancer bad everything and this has so much movement in it that I'm like going I feel like....but I'm pushing myself out of my comfort zone which is good

Great and we are done

